Followers of Islam are called Muslims. Muslim staff and students form a substantial part of the Flinders community. Acknowledging and respecting Muslim identities at Flinders therefore requires, in part, a better understanding of what Islam and being a Muslim is about.

About Islam

Islam is both a religion and a way of life. The Qur’an is a record of the exact words revealed by Allah to the Prophet Muhammad and is the major source of faith and practice for Muslims. Other sources include the Sunnah traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. Derived from both the Qur’an and Sunnah, Sharia refers to the comprehensive Muslim law covering every aspect of individual and collective living.

Muslims believe:

- There is one unique incomparable God, referred to as Allah.
- The angels were created by Allah.
- The prophets bring Allah’s revelations to mankind.
- There will be a day of judgement, where there will be individual accountability for one’s actions.
- God has supreme authority over human destiny.
- Life exists after death.

Islam originated in the Arabian Peninsula around 610 CE (AD), covering a period of over 1400 years to date. Consequently, differences have developed between groups. Islam can be divided into the following principle groups:

- Sunni – mainstream Muslims who rely exclusively on the Qur’an for guidance.
- Shi’ite – followers of Ali, a successor of Muhammad who combined Islam with some Christian practices.
- Sufi – the mystical branch of Islam.
- Druze – the followers of Darazi.

The Five Pillars of Islam

The framework of Muslim life is comprised of faith, prayer, charity, fasting and the pilgrimage to Mecca.

Shahadah (Declaration of Faith)

Shahadah is the declaration of the faithful that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger and servant of Allah.

Salah (Prayer)

There are five prescribed prayers which act as a direct link between worshipper and God. Prayers are performed at dawn, noon, mid-afternoon, after sunset and before retiring. Before praying, Muslims go through a routine ritual washing called wudu. Verses in Arabic are quoted from the Qur’an. Prayers are only led by an imam (religious teacher) during communal prayers, otherwise prayers are performed individually. All Muslims turn towards the city of Mecca when they pray.

Zakah (Charity Tax)

Islam prescribes that 2.5% of a person’s wealth is used to help the poor and needy. This tax is paid annually on the wealth accumulated in the previous year. Payment is compulsory for every individual who has wealth beyond their daily needs.

Ramadan (Fasting)

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar during which Muslims must abstain from food, drink and sexual relations from dawn to sunset. Fasting is regarded primarily as a method of self-purification and understanding the suffering of the poor.

By cutting oneself off from the worldly comforts, even for a short time, a fasting person increases one’s spiritual status and gains true sympathy with those who go hungry (Australian Federation of Islamic Councils 2015).

Ramadan is the month that the first verses of the Qu’ran were revealed, making it one of the holiest months of the Islamic calendar.

Hajj (Pilgrimage) to Makkah (Mecca)

The pilgrimage to Mecca is undertaken at least once in a lifetime for those who are physically and financially able to do so. Pilgrims wear simple garments, eliminating distinctions of class and culture, so that all stand equal before Allah. Considered the ‘journey of the heart and soul’, the Hajj is the biggest and most important journey in a Muslim’s life.
Muslims in Australia

- The history of Muslims in Australia begins well before European contact with the mainland. As far back as the 17th century, a harmonious relationship existed between Muslim fisherfolk from Southeast Asia and Indigenous people from northern Australia.
- Many people from the islands and territories under the dominion of the British Empire were used as slaves and navigators by early Australian settlers. Many of these people were Muslims.
- In the 1860s, a large number of Muslim Afghan camel drivers arrived in Australia to work the camel trains. Instrumental in guiding the ‘great explorers’ through the interior of the continent, many Muslim Afghans eventually settled in Alice Springs and the Northern Territory.
- The first mosque in Australia (the Adelaide Mosque in Little Gilbert Street, Adelaide) was built in South Australia in 1885 by the descendants of the cameleers.
- Muslims have fought for Australia in both world wars.
- Since World War Two, Muslim migrants, along with migrants of many other religions, have helped build the Australian economy and society.
- In the late 1960s there was a significant number of Muslim migrations from Turkey and Lebanon.
- During the 1990s, a significant number of Muslim refugees and migrants settled in Australia from Africa, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Bosnia Herzegovina, Albania, Indonesia and Malaysia.
- Many Muslims in Australia today (over 36%) were born in Australia.
- In the 2011 Census 2.2% of the population identified as Muslim.

Islamic religious observance

Place and style of worship

The Islamic place of worship is the mosque. However, a Muslim may pray almost anywhere e.g. home, office, factory, university. The main part of a mosque is the prayer room which has mats and carpets for use when praying. There are no seats or pews. Before entering the mosque, shoes must be removed and a ritual ablution performed before prayers commence. Men and women pray separately. While there are five prescribed prayers each day, midday on Fridays is the most important time for communal prayers usually performed at the mosque.

Religious teachers and leaders of prayer are called imams. For information about prayer rooms at Flinders University, visit the Oasis website.

Islamic symbols

Islam does not have any specific religious symbols.

Religious text

The religious text of Islam is Al-Qur’an (also known as the Quran or Koran). According to Islamic learning, this document records God’s words sent to Muhammad by divine revelation through the angel Gabriel, just as Moses and Jesus received divine revelation before him. The Quran is not the saying and acts of the Prophet Muhammad, rather it is what God said to him and to humanity.

Islamic dress code

Islam requires Muslims to dress in an overall modest and dignified manner. This includes covering certain parts of the body (awrah) when in public. For males, the awrah is from the navel to the knee and for females, every part of the body except the face and hands.

Both males and females must wear clothing that is thick enough and loose enough so as not to reveal the person’s skin colour or body shape. Colours and style of clothing must be plain enough not to draw attention to oneself.

Hijab

For females, loose clothing together with the headscarf covering the hair, neck and upper chest is known as the hijab and is the most common form of Islamic dress for women.

Burqa

This type of dress covers the face, head and body of the women. The wearing of the burqa is not essential and is not common in Australia.

For Muslim women, modesty in clothing is an expression of their faith and has nothing to do with women’s submission to men. Furthermore, being appreciated for one’s intellect and personality as opposed to body shape or fashion sense is, for some Muslim women, a liberating experience. See Liberation by the Veil for more information.
Dietary requirements and restrictions

The term ‘halal’ refers to food considered lawful according to the Qur’an. Muslim halal food includes:

- milk
- honey
- fish
- plants which are not intoxicant
- fresh or naturally frozen vegetables
- fresh or dried fruits
- legumes and nuts.
- grains such as wheat, rice, rye, barley and oats
- non-carnivorous animals such as cows, sheep, goats and ducks, provided they have been slaughtered according to Islamic rites.

Foods and drinks considered unlawful are sometimes called haram. They include:

- pork and pork products
- meat of animals who died before being slaughtered
- carnivorous animals (because they eat dead animals)
- blood
- intoxicants such as alcohol or illicit drugs.

For further information on Islamic dietary requirements, visit the Islamic Council of Victoria’s webpage, What is Halal?

Significant Islamic festivals and celebrations

The two major religious observances for Muslims are Ramadan and Hajj and their corresponding celebrations are Eid al Fitr and Eid al-Adha respectively.

The Muslim calendar is based on lunar months and is therefore ten or eleven days shorter than the Western (Gregorian) calendar. This means that significant Islamic religious and cultural dates differ each year.

Eid al Fitr/Festival of Breaking the Fast

This is a feast date commemorating the end of the fast of the month of Ramadan. At Eid al Fitr, people dress in either their best clothes or, if they can afford it, wear new clothes symbolising inner renewal after the fast. Parents, children and friends ask forgiveness of each other and thank Allah for his blessing. Traditional dishes are prepared and many give each other presents. Strangers and friends are welcomed to share and enjoy food together.

Eid al-Adha/Festival of the Sacrifice

After the pilgrimage to Mecca, Muslims worldwide celebrate Eid al-Adha. The festival is celebrated by sacrificing a lamb or other animals and distributing the meat to relatives, friends and the poor. The sacrifice symbolises obedience to Allah, and the distribution to others is an expression of generosity, one of the five pillars of Islam.

Respecting religious and cultural diversity at Flinders

The following information may assist in creating an environment that is considerate and respectful of the religious and cultural traditions of staff and students at Flinders University.

Flinders’ Equal Opportunity Policy

Flinders’ Equal Opportunity Policy is inclusive of the diverse elements associated with culture – age, race, religion, , political conviction, marital status, sexuality, gender, pregnancy, disability.

The Equal Opportunity Policy states:

Flinders University values and celebrates the social and cultural diversity that is reflected in its community, is committed to achieving equality of opportunity in education and employment and to promoting an environment where students and staff are able to study and work effectively, without fear of unlawful discrimination, harassment or bullying.

Oasis

Flinders University has established Oasis for the benefit of staff and students, in support of the pursuit of their diverse religious and spiritual views, beliefs and practices. Oasis is a centre for faith development and spiritual refreshment, providing a forum and home environment for the development of genuine community. It is intended to provide a space on campus where religious or spiritual activities can take place and a meeting place for groups and individuals with a focus on or interest in religious or spiritual matters. It is located at the southern end of the Union building on the Mall level.

Religious bodies appoint chaplains to the University. The chaplains work together as a multifaith team as well as being a resource for particular faiths. For further information visit the Oasis homepage.
Religious observance

Where it is reasonable and practicable to do so, flexible work and study arrangements can be made to accommodate the religious obligations of staff and students at Flinders. Examples include:

- Negotiated flexible work/study arrangements between heads of departments/supervisors and staff and students who are required to pray at certain times of the day or to attend other religious ceremonies at particular times of the year.
- Consideration of the main religious festivals when determining examination dates, assessment dates, field trips and arranging placements.
- Consideration given to student requests for extensions to accommodate religious observance.

Some common misconceptions about Muslims

- Not all Arabs are Muslim (many are Christian). Not all Muslims are Arab (most Muslims are not Arab).
- The star and crescent as depicted on some Muslim country flags does not have any significance to the Islamic faith. Rather, it is a tradition that has continued since the Ottoman Empire.

Other points for reflection

- Islam teaches that there are different functions for the right and left hands. The right hand is used to give and take, eat and drink, shake hands and wave. Using the left hand for these functions is considered offensive.
- The left hand is used for removing dirt, washing and wiping private parts after going to the toilet. Using the right hand for these functions is considered offensive.
- Shaking hands or touching members of the opposite sex who are not family is not permitted.
- Muslims do not celebrate Christmas or Easter. Therefore, greeting them with expressions such as ‘Merry Christmas’ or ‘Happy Easter’ is not appropriate.
- Not all people who identify as Muslim practise Islam.

References and Further Resources


Muslim Women’s Association of South Australia (MWASA) 2015, Muslim Women’s Association of South Australia <http://www.mwasa.org.au/wp/ >.


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